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RELIGIONS AND RECONCILIATION OF CONFLICTING SOCIOCULTURAL IDENTITIES¹

ABSTRACT

In the many cases of conflicts co-fuelled by sociocultural identity contestations, religions cannot play the role of reconcilers, because they have become part of the problem through association with one of the contesting parties. This contribution argues that, in order to come to terms with this, religions have to rediscover the reconciliation practices within their traditions, become more critical of their own past reconciliation record, and develop a theology that pays proper attention to the challenges generated by sociocultural identities. The argument is illustrated with an analysis of the role played by Christian churches in South Africa during the apartheid era.

1. INTRODUCTION

There exists a well-known narrative when it comes to religions and reconciliation, namely: The core business of religions is to try and understand the mechanisms of reconciliation between heaven and earth. As a consequence, religions can rely on a rich wisdom reservoir of sources and practices to assist them in the reconciliation of conflicts on earth. It is thus most common for them to call on their faithful to reconcile with each other in cases of conflicts.

¹ This article is an adaptation of the Tutu Junker Prestige Lecture of the Faculty of Theology, University of the Free State, 19 October 2017.

Outside the direct realm of religious communities, it is less self-evident to use reconciliation vocabulary. It is not impossible, however, as the case of post-apartheid South African illustrates. South Africa did not establish a Truth Commission to address the atrocities of the violent past, but a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The most iconic picture of the TRC shows Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in his clerical robe, chairing a state commission set up in a country where religion and state are separate entities. As a religious leader, Tutu was accepted as a ‘specialist’ or ‘professional’ in the business of reconciliation. Religions appreciate it when this expertise is recognized beyond the realm of their faith community.

At the same time, the reconciliation reputation of religions is constantly tarnished by religiously motivated practices of polarisation, discrimination, oppression, and killing of perceived ‘others’, the ‘they’ over against ‘us’. We should remind ourselves of the White evangelicals who voted President Trump into the White House; the Judaism represented by Prime Minister Netanyahu in Israel; the terror by ISIS with reference to Islam; the Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar as motivation for the genocide against the Rohingya people; the violent Hindu nationalism that brought Prime Minister Modi to power in India, and the reference to the so-called ‘Judeo-Christian’ tradition by secularists and nationalists in Europe in order to encourage islamophobia. In all these cases, religious groups and their leaders or political activists make a specific religion an identity marker of a sociocultural group, often in the form of a nation. In such instances, religions cannot play the role of reconciler as an outside party to the fighting factions, because they have become part of the conflict through their association with one of the contesting groups. Often, religious groups are not part of the solution, but part of the problem, especially considering the many conflicts that are contested in terms of national, ethnic, racial, tribal, or clan identity.

Over the past decade, a new master narrative has developed in our globalising world. It claims that our ultimate destiny is to be found in our own sociocultural identities expressed in terms of people, nation, *ethne*, race, tribe, or cultural identity, in general. In many cases, we experience these as positive. It provides connections with others, recognition, and a feeling of belonging. Parts of our history, our landscapes, the subtleties of our language and its literature, our foods and drinks, our music, the way in which we structure and govern our lives, and our moral values all contribute to much pride, and provide many elements that we want to pass on to our children. The more globalized our world becomes, the more we feel the need as human beings to express and strengthen our local, regional roots.

Over the past 50 years, social studies have provided more insight into the dynamics of our identities to such an extent that our individual identities

are layered. We might feel connected to other people because of the music we like, or because of the same football team we support, and so on. These personal identities and the prominence we give to them might change over time. Similar dynamics are at work in our group identities, which are also layered and might change over time. They are not divinely ordered for once and for all, but humanly constructed. This identity construction is not so much about what we have in common, but more about what makes us different from others.

As a consequence, this powerful experience of belonging is not only to be cherished. It distinguishes 'them' and 'us', and tends to separate 'us' from 'them'. As such, it can become a basis for exclusion. This awareness of difference can be exploited or straightforwardly be manipulated to reconstruct 'them' in threatening 'others'. History has proven its destructive potential. What started as projects of nation-building in 19th-century Europe would lead to two very devastating wars in the first half of the 20th century, with global impact motivated by narratives of humiliated national pride and fuelled with pseudo-scientific discourse on racial hierarchies.

When the Cold War ended, frozen nationalist conflicts erupted again in countries belonging to the sphere of influence of the former Soviet Union, with the former Yugoslavia as the best-known example. The current turmoil in the Middle East and, more broadly, in the Islamic world is part of an attempt to redefine who they are as peoples and nations. For many of them, their religion has become an important identity marker. The economic globalization has led to widespread discontent in Europe and North America due to job loss and the fear of loss of cultural identity. It gave rise to populist parties rallying on a new nationalist, anti-Islam and anti-EU agenda. The welcoming of refugees and migrants has now become a most sensitive political issue. Research on reasons why people voted for Brexit or for Trump as President of the United States of America has revealed that sociocultural discourse played a crucial role. This identity discourse was and is about protecting national identity, keeping the perceived 'other' out, and building walls.

Religions identify themselves in terms of their confessional identities. They tend to describe sociocultural identity contestations as a societal problem, as an external challenge. In fact, all religions are co-identified by a sociocultural identity, even those that claim a universal scoop, such as the Abrahamic religions. Religions tend to weave their history into the history of a people: by building places of worship, we have co-defined the territory; our vernaculars have co-defined the liturgies, cultural practices influence the way in which religions are governed, and so on. This blending has even been a successful mission strategy in the past.

What is there to do with religions in this age of identities? Some secularists, especially in the West, are of the opinion that the solution is to get rid of religions. I am convinced that this will neither work, nor happen. Being a religious person myself, I am aware of the reconciliation potential within religions, even when conflicts are framed in the language of sociocultural identities. This article addresses the central question: How can religions transform from being part of the problem to being part of the solution and open their potential for reconciliation, in the context of a powerful and potentially violent sociocultural identities contestation in a globalizing world?

This article explores three ways in which religions themselves can contribute to making that transformation:

- a. Rediscover reconciliation practices;
- b. Become more critical as a religion of their past record, and
- c. Develop a theology that pays proper attention to the challenges generated by sociocultural identities.

Instead of discussing religions in general, I will develop these three elements mainly from within the context of one religion to make it more specific. I will focus on Christianity, the religion I know best myself, as a religious practitioner, as ordained minister of a Christian denomination, and as a professional theologian. I am convinced, however, that similar answers in terms of unearthing practices, better analysis and priority strategy can also be applied to other religions. Being in South Africa, I will make use of the South African context to make my points, especially since the country has a long history of the challenge of living together with diverse people.

Rediscovering reconciliation practices

In November 1990, both Willie Jonker and Desmond Tutu played a major role at the so-called National Conference for Church Leaders held in Rustenburg (Alberts & Chikane 1991). The apartheid laws introduced by consecutive National Party governments had not only brought the country into a state of emergency and close to a civil war by then, but they had also caused a so-called church struggle that had fundamentally disrupted the relations within and among the churches in the country (De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2005). The event did not happen unexpectedly. In fact, in his Christmas address to the nation in 1989, the then State President F.W. de Klerk had “appealed to the Church in South Africa to formulate a strategy conducive to negotiation, reconciliation and change” (Alberts & Chikane 1991:14). This call on the churches must certainly have gained momentum with

the release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990. The material outcome of the Conference was the so-called 'Rustenburg Declaration' with its "unequivocal rejection of apartheid as sin" (Alberts & Chikane 1991:275-286).

Besides the declaration, the performance of Willie Jonker and Desmond Tutu turned this into a memorable event. As a speaker at the conference, the NG Kerk Stellenbosch University theologian Willie Jonker did not adhere to his prepared text. Listening to the other speakers, he realized that:

... a great chunk of guilt stood between us and other people in the country. I was afraid that the things I had thought of saying were simply too light and would not really touch sides Gradually I became convinced that we as the Dutch Reformed Church would never come to a proper understanding with other churches and Christians in our country, if we did not have the courage to openly and publicly confess to our share in the injustices of the past, and the estrangement that existed as a result of these (Gaum 2013:67-74; Afrikaans original quote in Jonker 1998:202).²

For this reason, he deviated from his originally prepared text and confessed as follows:

I confess before you and before the Lord, not only my own sin and guilt, and my personal responsibility for the political, social, economic and structural wrongs that have been done to many of you, and the result of which you and our whole country are still suffering from, but vicariously I also dare to do that in the name of the Dutch Reformed Church of which I am a member, and for the Afrikaner people as a whole. I have the liberty to do just that, because the Dutch Reformed Church at its last synod had declared apartheid a sin and confessed its own guilt of negligence in not warning against it and distancing itself from it long ago (Gaum 2013:72).³

Jonker's critique on apartheid in the church went a long way back. Indeed, after the establishment of a general synod bringing together the independent regional NG churches of the Cape, the Free State, Natal, Transvaal, and South West Africa in 1962, Jonker (1962) argued that the unification based on a common church order and confession should also include the so-called Coloured, Black and Indian daughter churches of the Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk (NG Kerk) as an expression of the visible unity of the church. His opponents indicated that this argument would result in non-Whites being included in all other societal sectors such as education, economy, social life, and so on (Van Tonder 2017:240-246).

2 Original Afrikaans quote in Jonker 1998:202.

3 Original Afrikaans quote in Hofmeyr 2002:218.

At the Rustenburg Conference, Jonker will have realized that for thirty years he had not vocally and forcefully drawn that conclusion as a leader of his church. He thus confessed his own sin and that of his church.

In his *No future without forgiveness*, Archbishop Tutu describes how he reacted to Jonker’s speech:

... such a heartfelt confession, could not be treated as just another example of rhetoric. Theologically, we knew that the gospel of our Lord and Savior constrained us to be ready to forgive when someone asked for forgiveness. ... So I got up to say that we accepted the deeply moving and sincere plea for forgiveness (Tutu 1999:274-275).

Tutu (1999:277) justified his bold move with the argument that, if the churches, with their immense potential as agents of reconciliation, could not reconcile with each other, it could very well send the wrong message to the politicians and to the people of God

This had a moving result on the conference. In Jonker’s own words:

At that moment everyone stood up. There were tears; there was a spirit of compassion. I had never experienced anything like this in my life. I experienced it as an embrace, a gesture of acceptance by fellow believers who, in deep compassion, alleviated us of our guilt (Gaum 2013:72; Jonker 1998:205).

Jonker and Tutu not only proceeded as representatives of their faith communities, but also acted in a very personal way. This touch of authenticity contributed to the emotional impact on the Conference. Confession of sins and offering of forgiveness are simply two Christian practices of reconciliation.

At the same time, the reception of their gestures shows the vulnerability of these Christian practices of reconciliation, even at a conference of Christian leaders. Both Jonker and Tutu experienced this event as a very special moment of grace, to which they would later refer again and again. Others have described these acts of confession of sin and forgiveness as a *kairos* moment (Lombard 2013:281), a moment of breakthrough and new beginning made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit among the participants. Looking back now after all these years, Jonker’s and Tutu’s “courage and theological vision” are uncontested (Lombard 2013:280-292). Still, once the dust had settled after the Conference, it became clear that not everybody approved of the confession and of the act of forgiveness. Jonker had not been mandated to do so by an ecclesial body. This formal argument indicated that many in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) were not ready to admit that apartheid policy was sinful not only in its practical

consequences, but also in its intentions. The official delegates of the DRC at the Conference backed Jonker's surprising statement, but the delegation could not endorse the final declaration of the summit with its rejection of apartheid as a sinful policy in "its intention, its implementation and its consequences", since, a month previously, the DRC synod had, in the accepted document *Church and Society 2*, condemned apartheid for its sinful practice (par. 285), but simultaneously maintained its honest and sincere intentions (par. 279) (Gaum 2013:73). Representatives of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa and of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, two daughter churches of the Dutch Reformed Church, were of the opinion that Tutu had offered forgiveness too easily (Tutu 1999:277; Bergen 2011:57-86).

These contestations of Jonker's unexpected confession and Tutu's spontaneous forgiveness fall in receptive ground in the current climate of discontent among South Africans about many post-apartheid unfulfilled promises. The continuing poverty and inequality mainly along the old racial lines have created resentment among the younger generation. They criticize people such as Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu and their generation for having offered forgiveness and reconciliation too easily. Indeed this sentiment resonates in another Christian conviction that, in order to avoid cheap forgiveness, restitution and restorative justice are needed, an insight so powerfully captured in the title of a book by John de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring justice* (2002). Not only confession of sin and offering of forgiveness, but also restorative justice belong to the Christian resources of wisdom.

The year 1990 was one of hope in South Africa. The Rustenburg Conference united churches that had not been on speaking terms with each other for decades. In the Rustenburg Declaration, the churches confess their sin, stress the need for justice, peace, and restitution, and commit themselves to action in, and for a new South Africa (Alberts & Chikane 1991:275-286). Church leaders and theologians offered suggestions on how the churches could contribute to reconciliation in the country, besides confessing sins and offering and accepting forgiveness. Some participants understood the call for reconciliation in terms of the need for more unity among churches, reconciliation of the churches. Others suggested that the role of the church in the reconciliation process was to facilitate negotiations. Others understood their role as partners in civil society by contributing items such as removal of apartheid laws, poverty alleviation, restitution, justice, attention for human rights, and the need to guarantee religious freedom to the negotiations agenda. Finally, others were of the opinion that the future of South Africa was in a new massive mission enterprise, in order to change the hearts of the people. The Rustenburg Declaration started with a common confession of guilt, but

more than half of the statement contained suggestions for a reconciled and new South Africa. Although the churches expressed failure, the underlying trust was still one of confidence in their knowledge of how reconciliation works. In this way, the churches presented themselves again in the public square in their role as experts in, and professionals of reconciliation.

Becoming more critical of our own historical record

In the ensuing years, however, the South African state would challenge the churches to dig deeper into their responsibility for the racialised society during the apartheid years. After the first democratic elections, the new Parliament passed the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act (No. 34 of 1995) in mid-1995 (Doxtader & Salazar 2007:13-27). It established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (TRC). Its first task under Chapter 2, section 3:1(a-d) would be to portray the gross violations of human rights in the period between the Sharpeville massacre (1 March 1960) and the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as President (10 May 1994) through investigations and hearings. The TRC listened to individual victims, perpetrators, and witnesses. It also identified and organized special hearings for sectors in society that were specifically responsible for the human right violations during the apartheid era: the business and labour sectors, the judiciary, the health sector, the media, as well as the faith community. A common confession of sin did not suffice. A common statement such as “I am sorry”, as in the Rustenburg Declaration, did not suffice. The state invited organised individual religious and confessional organisations to scrutinize their own apartheid past.

In his *Chronicle of the Truth Commission*, Piet Meiring gives an impression of how the idea of an institutional hearing on the faith communities was shaped as the TRC unfolded. After the first months of hearings, the commissioners were seeking ways to counter the still widespread existing suspicion about the fairness of the process, especially among the Afrikaners. After a conversation with the NG Kerk, they realised that all churches had a not yet fully untapped potential to contribute to confession and reconciliation. How could all the churches be encouraged to take ownership of this process? (Meiring 1999:60-61). Months later, the South African Council of Churches suggested organizing a faith community hearing (Meiring 1999:120-121). The Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa (RICSA) in the University of Cape Town’s Department of Religious Studies advised the TRC on setting up faith community hearings. They recommended a format in which the churches were first invited to answer, in a written statement, five questions followed by hearings. The hearings took place in East London from 17 to 19 November 1997

(Meiring 1999:265-285).⁴ The Commission later asked RICSA to produce a document on the faith hearings that could be used as a basis for its own final report. RICSA finally produced a report of some sixty pages on the basis of over a thousand pages of written submissions and oral testimonies at the hearing, entitled *Faith communities and apartheid: A report prepared for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission by the Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa*. The report became the central document in the volume *Facing the truth* (Cochrane *et al.* 1999). The report of the special hearings of the Faith Community, that would become part of Volume 4 of the official TRC Report, was in essence a substantially abridged version of the original RICSA report.

After a general introduction (§§ 1-6), and an introduction into the variety of faith communities in South Africa (§§ 7-28), the TRC Report on the faith community in Volume 4 Chapter 3 identifies the three roles of faith communities during South Africa's apartheid past: agents of oppression (§§ 29-65), victims of oppression (§§ 66-80), and opponents of oppression (§§ 81-113). The Report ends with a short description of the role of faith communities during the transition (§§ 114-8) and summary findings (§§ 119-123). For the purposes of this article, faith communities as agents of oppression is the most interesting part. What is the result of the soul searching among the faith communities and how does the Report analyse the findings? The section on agency of oppression is subdivided into active support of apartheid – “acts of commission and legitimisation” -, and passive toleration – “acts of omission”. Religious denominations actively supported the apartheid state policies through their involvement in state structures, most problematic of which was the contribution through military chaplaincy, the suppressing of dissidents, and the propagation of state ideology. The subsection on acts of omission (§§ 58-65) includes sections on avoiding responsibility, lacking courage, failure to translate resolution into action, and failure to support members who were involved in anti-apartheid activities. The extent to which the apartheid thought had influenced the faith communities is best illustrated under the section ‘internalising racism’.

The TRC Report devotes three paragraphs to internal racism within the faith communities, namely structural racism in Christian churches, non-structural racism in Christian churches, and racism within non-Christian faith communities. The paragraph on structural racism within the churches indicates how structural racism not only existed in churches that split on racial lines, but was also a reality in churches that were officially united.

4 For the Faith Community Institutional Hearing, see also the video-clip in Special Report 75 sent out on SABC on 23 November 1997: <http://sabctrc.saha.org.za/tvseries/episode75/section4/movie.htm>

In the latter group of churches, racism was internalized through segregated student organisations, racially divided conferences, and the segregated organisation of education. Non-structural racism refers to support of racism, to the actual existence of Black and White congregations, and to racial discrimination of Black clergy. The third paragraph indicates that discrimination was also well established within faith communities outside Christianity. The paragraph summarises the findings of the section:

Hence, whether legislated or not, and even in the face of their own resolutions to condemn racist government policies, many South African faith communities admitted to having mirrored the racial divisions of society (TRC Report Vol. 4:68-9, § 44).

But the most revealing paragraph is the first introductory one to the section on agents of oppression:

In most cases, faith communities claimed to cut across divisions of race, gender, class and ethnicity. As such, they would seem *by their very existence* to have been in opposition to the policies of the apartheid state, and in pursuing their own norms and values, to have constituted a direct challenge to apartheid policies. However, contrary to their own deepest principles, many faith communities mirrored apartheid society, giving the lie to their profession of a loyalty that transcended social divisions (TRC Report Vol. 4:65, § 29) (*italics in the original text*).

This quote observes a contradiction between the ‘deepest principles’ of the faith communities and the reality of their existence during the apartheid era, a praxis that “mirrored apartheid society”. By putting in *italics by their very existence*, the drafters of the Report suggest that the cutting “across divisions of race, gender, class and ethnicity” is an essential aspect of the self-understanding of these faith communities.

The language in terms of “norms, values and principles” suggests ethical failures of faith communities in relation to the apartheid past. However, the underlying RICS report formulated its analysis in even graver terms: In most cases faith communities claim to cut across divisions of race, class and ethnicity. As such it would seem that faith communities would present a key point of opposition, by their very existence, to the policies of the apartheid state. But also, the norms and values proclaimed by faith communities would or should have challenged directly the policies of the state. That this was not the case lies behind many of the communities’ apologies to the South African people. Indeed, contrary to their own deepest traditions, many faith communities mirrored apartheid society. They thus not only failed in terms of South African society, but they failed their own faith tradition (Cochrane *et al.* 1999:36).

This RICSA paragraph distinguished between the existential quality of faith communities transcending societal divisions and their ethical teachings (“but also ...”) and it understood the failure not merely ethical, but broader in terms of their own “deepest traditions” and “faith tradition”. These “traditions” might refer to liturgical practices, theology, internal rules and structures, and, of course, ethical teaching.

In its concluding findings, the TRC Report indicates in five paragraphs in what way the faith communities bear responsibility for the past apartheid society. The first three repeat elements mentioned earlier; the two last paragraphs stress other problematic aspects of religions and especially Christianity in their influence in South Africa. Some missiological teachings and manifestations of Christian imperialism inspired religious proselytising and religious nationalism, thus contributing to inter-religious inspired suspicions and religiously inspired conflict. And last but not least, Christianity must face specific responsibility for undermining the cultural and religious African identity because of its history of power in the country (TRC Report Vol. 4:91-2, §120-123). These two added paragraphs refer to aspects that have, in recent years, become more central to the debate: Christianity as part of, and co-responsible for colonization. It points to the importance of power imbalance.

The balance is grave. Religions, especially Christianity as the dominant religion, bore a major responsibility for that past. ‘Internalised racism’ is singled out as a major factor. Being aware of the limitations of the TRC, due to the focus of its mandate, it remains remarkable that, as an independent organ commissioned under state law, the TRC was confident to provide an evaluation of the content of the faith of faith communities, stating that their very existence, norms, values and deepest principles were in opposition to apartheid policies. One would expect such a statement from an authoritative body of a faith community, not from a national Truth and Reconciliation Commission as part of a secular state. Taking into account the influence of faith communities, especially Christian denominations, the composition of the TRC, including Christian theologians working at the University of Cape Town, and the charismatic presence of its chairperson, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the statement comes as no surprise. The final conclusion is that religions, in general, should be more critical on their track record when it comes to evaluating their past in relation to sociocultural identities and their potential to contribute to reconciliation in society.

Develop a theology that pays proper attention to sociocultural identities

Religions tend to justify their existence in terms of their difference from other religions, mostly in confessional terms. In fact, many differences are not related to confessional deviations, but to links to specific cultural or national identities. This explains the phenomenon captured in the phrase ‘Sunday morning the most segregated hour’. Religions tend to be silent on their relation to sociocultural identities and the way in which they are thereby formed and transformed. South Africans have become familiar with the phenomenon of state capture, but churches should become aware of the historical phenomenon of church capture, or, more broadly, religion capture. Religions tend to turn a blind eye. Theology, as academic discipline of critical reflections on the message of religions, has been massively involved in the confessional disputations, but has, in general, not been critical enough of the way in which sociocultural identities have formed the central convictions of religions. In this context, it makes sense to refer to the South African context. The RICS Report also contained a section ‘Reflections and recommendations’ that would not be retained in the final TRC report. Reflecting on the process of the TRC hearings, the RICS report acknowledged that “the role of theology and its relation to ideology was given some space at the hearings”, but it also observed some omissions and aspects remained unexposed, such as the role played by theological training institutions (Cochrane *et al.* 1999:66).

Some theological answers on sociocultural identities have been formulated in the past, but these are not fully convincing. I provide a few examples from within the Christian theological tradition. Many Christian theologians like to refer to the response of Karl Barth in the context of the nazification of the German church and the Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Church. Unfortunately, that document does not address the German nature of the German church; it only claims that the church cannot be subdued under the German state authorities. Another contribution comes in the form of ethical appeals. In situations of crises or conflicts where sociocultural narratives are at stake, churches and theologians call for moderation, tolerance, peace, reconciliation, hospitality, and so on. Without a deeper analysis of what is at stake, however, these calls often go unnoticed. Another unconvincing solution occurs when it is framed as an external problem, without addressing the potential captivity of faith communities themselves. Churches often try to defend the relationship between them and the nation by claiming to be patriotic, but not nationalistic. We can acknowledge the political nuances, but they will not provide a convincing theological argument.

The most inspirational source for a Christian theological answer is the story of the biggest challenge of the earliest Christian community as told in the book of Acts and the Letters of Paul. Should non-Jewish converts to the Christian faith first be expected to accept Jewish culture with its food laws and circumcision? Paul won the argument with his theology that our baptismal identity transcends being Jew or Greek (Gal. 3:27-28). This old central theme has, in some way, been re-discovered in the so-called new perspectives on Paul (Sanders 1977; Dunn 2005; Wright 1997). Developing an authentic Christian voice in response to the master narrative of finding one's own destiny in one's sociocultural identity will come by working in at least different areas of theological inquiry: a deepened theo-logos that relates the Abrahamic religions' insistence on monotheism and the Christian Trinitarian understanding of God with the existence of a diversity of peoples; a renewed understanding of salvation as peace and reconciliation, as breaking down the wall of division and exclusion (Eph. 2:11-6); a renewed theological anthropology that describes the contribution of diversity of peoples and cultures within the one humanity; an ecclesiology that creates space for the diversity of peoples and cultures within the one church of Jesus, the Christ, and a new eschatology that provides a common hope for all the peoples of the earth.

It takes time for religions to come to terms with new major societal challenges. I provide the following example. Since the end of the 18th century, thousands and thousands, and later millions of people flocked into the new industrial centres in the developing nation states in Europe, hoping to find a job and build a decent living, but they ended living in abject poverty. This socio-economic, extremely vulnerable reality of alienation, exploitation, and slavery increasingly defined their lives. During the 19th century, some narratives presented a solution. One such storyline claimed that people should remain confident, because the wealth generated by the combination of technological development and capital input would suffice to solve the poverty problem. Another narrative claimed that workers should take faith in their own hands, start a revolution, and overthrow the exploiting capitalist elites in the hope of finally building a classless society where poverty is erased. What was the Christian faith's response? Christian movements and organizations soon developed diaconal institutions in the emerging cities and called for charity. The major historical churches, however, only realized the depth of the problem by the end of the 19th century. It was only in 1891 that Pope Leo XIII addressed the plight of the poor working classes in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. In that same year, Abraham Kuyper presented a paper entitled *The social question and the Christian religion*.

It was one thing to build on existing Christian ethics of charity and to recognize the plight of the socio-economically afflicted, but it was still another to re-articulate the gospel, the good news of Jesus, as good news for the poor. How could the revolutionary words of the apostle Paul that in Christ Jesus there is neither slave nor free person be translated as good news for the poor (Gal. 3:28)? Theologians of the global South provided a major contribution. During the 20th century, liberation theologians of Latin America, the Dalit theologians in India, and the Minjung theologians in Korea, among others, taught Christians all over the world to read Scripture from the perspective of the weak, the poor, and the oppressed. Their approach influenced theology in major ways: how we understand God; what salvation means; how the Holy Spirit works; how to understand the church; eschatology, and so on. Consequently, public theologians worldwide address issues of poverty and generally socio-economic identities. They no longer only speak in terms of God’s mercy, but also of God’s justice. Justice and social transformation have become keywords in the Christian message in the context of poverty. When reading the statements of Pope Francis or declarations on social issues of many churches across the globe, we will recognize this vocabulary.

My final observation is that it is time for religions and their theologians to take the new societal challenge of sociocultural identities seriously, no longer as an external problem, but as an internal one. Identity issues renew theology and change religions. It is a challenge that requires a sense of urgency. After 200 years, Christian churches have found new confidence in addressing situations of poverty. But this awareness comes with a humble realization that, in the meantime, many people have opted for the alternative gospels of the 19th century in updated formats and left the Christian message unnoticed.

It is evident that we live in an extremely dangerous world when it comes to the abuse of the master narrative of salvation within our own sociocultural identity. There is no time to loose. We urgently need to find an authentic Christian voice and I call on colleagues to work together on this challenge.

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